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SUBJECT: DEMONSTRATIONS CONTINUE IN CENTRAL HIGHLANDS, ARRESTS
CONFIRMED

REF: A) HCMC 406 B) HCMC 414 C) HANOI 459 D) 07 HCMC 805 AND PREVIOUS

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1. (SBU) Summary. Demonstrations continued in the Central Highlands this week, with reports of clashes between ethnic minority groups and GVN authorities in Gia Lai, Dak Lak and Kon Tum provinces. Discontent over land expropriation and zoning policies and encouragement from "hostile foreign elements" continue to be reported as the root causes behind the recent outbreak of unrest. Reliable sources have confirmed the arrest and detention of several ethnic minority "instigators" and tighter security measures in neighboring districts close to the clashes. End Summary.

Clashes Continue, Arrests in Gia Lai

2. (SBU) The Central Highlands demonstrations that began in early April continued this week, with ConGen contacts reporting clashes between joint police and military forces armed with guns, electrical batons and tear gas and ethnic minority demonstrators equipped with sticks and farming implements (Ref A). One reliable ConGen contact said he overheard a Gia Lai security official say that troops have been given full authority to stop the demonstrations with force if necessary. While there have been a few reports of injuries and fatalities on both sides, these accounts have not been independently confirmed and there have been no official media reports on the demonstrations thus far. ConGen contacts in the region continue to dismiss Montagnard Foundation, Inc.(MFI) reports alleging "thousands" of demonstrators on the march and authorities "torturing" protesters as exaggerated.

3. (SBU) ConGen contacts did confirm that demonstrations have so far broken out in Gia Lai Province (Chu Se, Chu Pah, Duc Co, Ia Grai, A Yun Pa, Krong Pa Districts), Dak Lak Province (Ea H'Leo District) and Kontum Province (Sa Thay District). Demonstrators included women, children and young men. Reliable contacts confirmed that security has been tightened in the region, especially in some Gia Lai hot spots where "nobody can either get in or out." One contact reported his cell phone service was cut off and that it is impossible to contact his associates in certain "sensitive" areas. Another contact expressed concern over some clashes involving Kinh (Vietnamese majority) civilians and ethnic minorities, which could intensify the situation and spur racial conflicts. (Comment: As noted Ref B, Dak Lak People's Committee Chairman Cu noted that the array of free or subsidized services available only to ethnic minorities has begun to breed resentment among some members of the Vietnamese majority. End Comment.)

4. (SBU) ConGen contacts in the region continue to cite

disgruntlement over provincial authorities' land expropriation and zoning policies as the spark that ignited this most recent round of protests, and also believe overseas groups may be encouraging the demonstrators in order to garner "the international community's attention" and thus, their assistance.

A reliable ConGen contact did report the arrest of six ethnic minority people, including women, in Gia Lai Province for allegedly instigating the demonstrations after receiving instructions from "hostile foreign elements" (Ref C). Some residents were also detained for investigation by authorities for three to four days, then released. Post has not yet confirmed the names of those arrested or detained. While foreign groups may be encouraging ethnic minorities to continue with the protests, the land issues that sparked this round of demonstrations are unlikely to be resolved quickly or easily.

Land issues are the link

15. (SBU) These protests in the Central Highlands come on the heels of waves of lands rights demonstrations that have swept through the Mekong Delta as well as HCMC and surrounding provinces over the past year (Ref D). The abuse of authority by political insiders to acquire land either for free or at greatly reduced cost is emerging as the key area where the disease of corruption most directly touches the lives of thousands of ordinary Vietnamese. While a variety of methods are used, the most common is for officials to use eminent domain to acquire private land for the nominal "official" price of agricultural or forest land before rezoning it to a much more profitable use, such as industrial parks, housing development or large-scale industrial farms. As with everything in Vietnam, the situation varies enormously by province. In HCMC, regulations adopted in the wake of 2007 land rights protests provide small landowners and homeowners with a broad range of protections. The city government is also moving to address, at least in part, past injustices. In a few areas, most recently in Can Tho (Mekong Delta) but also in Danang (Central Vietnam), senior provincial officials have been sacked and even arrested. In other provinces, authorities are ignoring or actively suppressing the

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protests.

16. (SBU) In the Central Highlands these abuses have provoked another dimension of discontent because they transfer land away from long-time ethnic minority occupants to already wealthier Kinh individuals and businesses.

17. (U) This cable was coordinate with Embassy Hanoi.
FAIRFAX